

PAIN

By Whitley Strieber

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When I encountered Janet O'Reilly I was doing research by "networking" into the community of prostitutes. This is more difficult than it might seem. To connect with a prostitute for business purposes isn't hard; to question her about the nature of her trade and her experience is practically impossible.

My research was for a novel. In the early eighties I was just beginning to see the novel as a form of political art. Previously I had viewed it as entertainment, and what political content my work had was no more than fortuitous.

I have always felt the need to do a great deal of research for my books. The Dark required me to track wolves in Canada and Minnesota. For Red Moon I studied five or six historical eras with care.

For my new book, to be called Pain, I wanted to know not only about prostitution but also about the various perversions that attach themselves to it. There are sexual desires so exploitative that people will not gratify them without being paid even in our exploitative society. These have to do for the most part with pain and death. For

death is connected to sexuality--witness the spider. Who hasn't wondered what the male spider feels, submitting at the same time to the ecstasy of coitus and the agony of death?

For almost all of human history it has been believed that there is something to be gained by human sacrifice. There are lurid tales of it in ancient times, when it was practiced formally. In the Golden Bough Frazer comments that "worship of the feminine principle was everywhere and in all times associated with human sacrifice." This is, naturally, an outrageous misstatement of fact. All early religion was associated sexuality and so with death; human sacrifice was an integral part of much ritual. There has forever been the notion that something higher than men had to be fed on human souls. Janet has taught me both the truth and the error in this concept. She has taught me with my own life's blood.

Because of the belief that the importance of the victim matters, the sacrifice of kings is an ancient western tradition. It persisted in organized form into the Roman Empire. The emperors were not assassinated for political reasons, as is normally supposed, but in a secret religious ritual that formed the center of the Roman state cult. Only a few emperors escaped this fate--Hadrian by letting the Vestals

drown his beloved catamite in the Nile, Trajan by suffering such a terrible illness that they decided that his torment was more satisfactory to the Gods than would be his death. All of this is chronicled in the recently discovered Books of Grammius Metarch, whose deposit lay undisturbed in the Vatican library until February of 1985.

The slow torment and abnegation involved in the great rituals of sacrifice--where a haughty lord was humiliated and tortured before his former subjects--derived from the conclusion that death was not the only thing wanted. Suffering was also wanted. We make an error by trying to interpret the motives of higher beings. To learn from them we must first accept their presence, and then their primacy over us. Western culture with its dependence on empiricism and its exaltation of the individual, equips us for neither of these things.

It takes the fire of great agony to burn away these confused notions. That is the reason for the suffering associated with sacrifice.

Suffering leads people to understand themselves. This is perhaps why there is a tremendous and subtle mechanism of destruction in human life. We are not here for the wine, but for the stones. What might spread the boundaries of Camelot is destroyed by those who love us the most.

It has been whispered that President Kennedy was killed in an alchemical ritual entitled "The Death of the White King," the purpose of which was to open the door to new suffering in the world, perhaps to bring about the long and complicated series of events that would end in nuclear war. Even a small nuclear war might touch off atmospheric changes that would lead to cooling short of "nuclear winter," but intense enough to cause the one fatal summer of snow that could lead to a new ice age. After Kennedy's death a famous Scottish prophet saw the snows spreading down from Ben Bulben to cover the whole world. Other prophets have also seen snows.

Even if we save ourselves from war, the environment is turning against us. There is increasing volcanic activity throughout the world, almost as if the planet itself was beginning to do battle on behalf of suffering.

The eruption of El Chicon in 1983 spread ash into Texas six hundred miles to the north. The Mexican government closed off the area of the volcano. It remains closed. It is known that El Chicon ejected more debris into the atmosphere than six thousand hydrogen bombs. We are still feeling the effects. The El Nino that took place in the Pacific in 1984--85 and led to the vast Borneo Conflagration

which burned an area of the rain forest the size of New England was a direct result of El Chicon. And the world is getting colder because of El Chicon and numerous other volcanoes.

Right now Buffalo is struggling under a deeper snow cover than ever before in recorded history. If there comes a year when the snows do not melt across Canada and the Northern U.S., the glacier will come back. This will be an abrupt thing: the snow will reflect so much heat and light that the next winter will be more intense, the next summer colder. Then the glacier will begin to move.

Human sacrifice has also been thought of as form of appeasement of the gods. The Nazi destruction of the Jews was a particularly vicious exception to this rule: Hitler killed the Jews to consolidate his power. They owned too much of the German economy, and nothing he did would ever make them trust him. They formed a certain reservoir of opposition and so had to be destroyed. Weren't they sacrificed for the sake of Naziism?

At the beginning of my studies with Janet O'Reilly I would have contended that there was something which accepted their sacrifice and in return destroyed Naziism. The Jews thus gave their lives to destroy Hitler.

The did indeed, but not for the reason I thought. We do not give our sacrifices, we receive them. The greatest sacrifice produces the greatest learning. The most blessed are those who suffer the most. That is the prime esthetic of death, at once the horror of it and the miracle. Thus Hitler's victims are among the greatest of all heroes. But we only mourn them, we do not celebrate their valor, because we do not understand what they really did.

The one thing that became clear to me from my association with Janet is that there is something that feeds on human suffering. It is not a principle or some nebulous spiritual presence, but a real civilization, albeit with higher goals, motives and understanding than our own.

Except on rare occasions it does not act directly in our world, but rather affects it indirectly. The farmer does not live in the pigsty; he conceived it, created it and manages it from afar. Day to day, it remains the possession of the pigs.

This is an example of its indirect action. Back in 1926 and 1927 my uncle lived in Munich. Hitler was there, and so was one Karl Haushofer, the leader of a group called the Vril Society. In 1961 I found in an old desk a picture of this uncle lying in a coffin in what seemed to be a North African background. He took it from me and

furiously tore it up. After his death twelve years later my father told me that this had been a photograph of his initiation into Haushofer's Vril Society. There has long been a rumor that this group raised up a demon in the body of one of its less exalted members, Adolf Hitler. Of course they did not "raise a demon." There are no demons. But Hitler believed they had, and if as he had you discard empiricism, belief is also a reality.

The final goal of the Vril Society was the ritual known as "The Death of the White King." In the weeks before the Kennedy assassination my uncle became morose and irritable. A few days before he narrowly escaped death when his car exploded due to a faulty gas line. The day before he had a terrible heart attack on a plane he had chartered in an effort to leave the United States. Afterward he died a lingering death due to congestive heart failure. Over those twelve years, I do not think he spoke a thousand words. He grew thinner and thinner, became a haunted shadow and died.

At first I assumed that I met Janet O'Reilly by accident, but this is obviously not true. To explore the reason that the meeting was contrived, I must digress broadly once more, into the largely buncombe world of "ufology."

There is evidence all around us of the presence of the hidden world. We reject it, though, as silliness and foolery.

Because it knows that this hidden civilization feeds on us, the government does everything possible to hide reality. It does not want us to know that our lives, our culture, our very history has been designed for the purpose of causing us suffering, and that there is nothing whatsoever that any of us can do to relieve ourselves of this burden.

Ten years ago, in the course of another research effort, I met a man--since dead--who claimed that the National Security Agency had a document a hundred and thirty pages long which told the truth about UFOs, making an almost irrefutable case for the fantastic notion that they are the artifacts of an intelligent civilization so far in advance of our own that we literally cannot see its manifestations except on rare occasions when they probe into our temporal space, much as the farmer enters the pigsty to check the health of his animals.

The underlying thesis of the paper is that this higher species is native to earth, and that--by their own lights--they use us just as we use the pigs. I know that this is true because Janet has shown me that it is true. For reasons that will become clear, I was earmarked for

special suffering. As my understanding has increased, I have come to love my tormentors, and share with them their own sorrow.

I was astonished to see in 1983 that NSA had been approached by CAUS (Citizens Against UFO Secrecy) under the Freedom of Information Act to divulge what it knows about UFOs. Officially, the government has made a massive effort to debunk the whole notion of "flying saucers," claiming that they are all either hoaxes or misperceptions. However, when it was time for it to give up certain information about UFOs, it took a very different stance. The Justice Department fought furiously on behalf of NSA to retain exactly one document, which is the "core truth" of the matter. Its length is a hundred and thirty pages.

If what I was told was truly the content of this paper, then the obvious conclusion is that they use us for their own reasons, gaining something we do not understand from our suffering and our slaughter, gaining strength perhaps, or pleasure, or maybe even the fundamental energy of their civilization. As the burning of oil fuels human civilization, moving planes and cars, providing electricity and heat, so also the carnage of human beings might provide this invisible higher civilization with its prime energy source. Perhaps there is a burst of

very fine energy as the soul explodes from the body--an energy which can be used for the most subtle and powerful purposes. Or perhaps the soul is, simply, food for finer bellies.

Our suffering does not benefit them directly, but rather the growth our suffering brings us. To wreak mayhem in the world is not the responsibility of demons, but of angels. It is their greatest and most painful duty, the one they hate for the agony they must cause, but love for the riches of understanding it brings.

This is a slaughterhouse, but we the victims are not gainsayed the blessing of a quick club to the head or the slitting of the throat. The greater our learning, the happier the angels.

Why must we suffer to learn? Because pain breaks down the barriers of ego, of personality, of false self. It separates us from ourselves and allows us to see deep. Witness the Book of Job, which in the secret texts Janet uses, is called the Book of Man.

The best death would be an ecstatic mixture of loving acceptance and deepest despair.

I met Janet O'Reilly at the Terminal Diner at the corner of 12th and West Streets in Greenwich Village. I was there because of my research. The Hellfire Club is nearby, a haunt of New York's

sadomasochistic community. I particularly wanted to connect with some of the people who went there to make money. I wasn't interested in the compulsive participants, but rather in the men and women who preyed on them.

It was three o'clock in the morning, and the diner was nearly empty. In the week I had been going there, I had drawn three interesting specimens into my net, and learned a great deal from them. When she sat down in my booth, I assumed that Janet had heard about me from one of them. My standing offer was twenty-five dollars for fifteen minutes of talk. "I've been doing pain for about two years," she said without so much as an introduction.

SM is to some degree a matter of costume and makeup. The people involved in it are fantasists at heart, and they enjoy elaborate regalia and ritual. A good part of torture is contained in the drama and the waiting that accompanies lengthy preliminaries and preparations--the strapping of cuffs, arrangement of tools, application of leather appliances, and so forth. Janet revealed no hint of the exotic in her dress.

She wore a fresh-looking blue frock. Her hair was golden brown and conventionally waved. Her face was soft, the face of a girl, with

inviting, delicate lips, a straight nose and eyes softly rimmed by big lashes, framed by arching brows. It was a completely winning face, as pure a face as I have ever seen. Her eyes were light green and were the only thing in her face that suggested anything more than sock hops and torrid back seats. It was not that they were dazed or shadowed or cruel--not at all. They were the eyes of a surpassingly intelligent person--bright and quick and full of life. More than that they were kind eyes. Looking into them, one sensed a true place of rest.

I smiled at her. "You heard about my deal?"

"What deal?" Her voice was fluid and soft. She was not at all like the other people I had met in her profession. I ought to say that I found them hard or exotic or slitheringly dangerous but I didn't. Their chief distinguishing characteristic was that they were just ordinary people. To one degree or another all of them dressed up, but scratch the studded surface and you revealed Flatbush.

"I have a deal. People tell me about their trade, and I give them twenty five bucks. It isn't much money, but I'm a safe ear, and people like to talk."

"I don't know anything about it."

"Why did you sit down here, then?"

She looked at me dubiously, as if she couldn't believe that I would ask such an obvious question. She folded her arms. I wasn't going to get an answer.

"I would like to hear about what it is you do."

She reached across the table and touched my cheek. Her fingers were cool and firm; her hand did not shake like it would have if she'd been on drugs. Many of the women who get into pain do it because the money is good and the johns usually don't demand youth or beauty. Many even want a degree of ugliness and dirt. Pain is the last refuge of the demolished whore.

"Like I said, I do pain." Again her eyes found mine. "I do it the way it was meant to be done, and I do it for the right reason."

It was an invitation. "You've drawn the wrong conclusion about me. I'm not a john."

"Every man is a john."

"If you mean an exploiter of women--in that sense--"

"Every man is a john. And every man wants what I have to give. When I want a john I just hit the next guy I see. I never miss."

At that moment my life was ruined. I did not discover a masochist within myself, and become addicted to the whip. What

happened to me is more terrible than that. Indeed, I have seen so much of the unusual in life that I tend to think that all perversions are mild, no more than slightly startling variations on the theme of relationship that dominates all human experience. Indeed, the adoration of the submissive for the dominant in a moment of high sexual drama is a beautiful thing to witness. Like all real love it is innocent, and is only intensified by the studied indifference of the skilled sadist.

"I don't want to break your record," I said.

She smiled, color coming into her cheeks. "They never do. What's your fantasy?"

I thought at once of my wife. I have been married for eighteen years. I have three children. My eldest daughter could not be much younger than this woman, who I still knew as "Lauren Stone." Not until I became a part of her inner circle did she tell me her real name. Even now when I think of that first meeting, I think not of Janet but of Lauren Stone. She is, of course, an excellent actress. Lauren Stone was not an assumed name. It was a character. Janet is also a character. No doubt she has many others, as many as she wants, potentially one for each person she meets.

"I don't have a fantasy. I told you, I'm not into this. It isn't my--"

"Don't say 'bag.' You can explain yourself more cogently than that."

"It isn't my way. I'm afraid that I have normal sex with my normal wife, and that's all."

"I told you, I do pain. Pain and sex are not the same thing. They aren't even similar."

"In many minds they're bound up together. A lot of people can't have pleasure without intermingling pain."

"They don't interest me. You can't want to suffer if you're really going to. If you seek it out, it becomes a variant of pleasure. I don't give pleasure, I give pain. And in return you get a gift."

"I'm listening."

"The gift is, I lift the burden of self from your shoulders. You can see clearly then. You can see the truth of the world, when you are no longer encumbered by will. That's why nobody ever turns me down, once they understand what that truly means."

She was glowing. There is no other word to describe how ineffably beautiful she was at that moment. That the human form could express such loveliness still amazes me. I want so badly to see

her again. One day I know that I will see her. The thought makes me colder than the wind that is howling around my cabin.

At the present moment I am in a tiny log cabin in the woods west of Ellenville, New York. The north wind roars down from the mountains, a cataract in the night. Across the room my wife snores softly. Downstairs my children sleep in silence, each one under a down comforter, snuggled with a cat or, in the case of my son, his dog.

When I go to her and submit myself, a part of my suffering will be the certain knowledge that all of their lives will be damaged by my act. My pain will be infinitely greater for understanding that it will lead to theirs. To know that you will cause grief to those you love is a very hard thing.

That first night I made my fatal mistake: I allowed her to take me to her apartment, a miserable, filthy cellar on Thirteenth Street. In the diners a sort of coldness overcame me, a shuddering of the heart that left me breathless, but also in some peculiar way in her power.

As I walked along beside her, I visualized an elegant den, perhaps the top half of a brownstone or an enormous loft space. I was not prepared for the two dark rooms, and the roaches scuttling away

as she turned on the light. In the first room there was an old iron bed and a tiny Victorian servant's tub, the sort that you crouch in. A two burner gas ring stood on a small counter near a clear plastic dish full of withered salad greens and a plate of deteriorating tofu.

Beside the bed was a low shelf containing a few books. I saw Swann's Way, Castle to Castle and The Best of P.G. Wodehouse. Marking a place in the Wodehouse was a small, black pincers.

"I stay here when I'm working with somebody," she said. She smiled up at me, a bright, heartbreakingly lovely smile. "I hope you like it."

There was no sensible reply. I just shook my head. The rooms were quite cold, clammy. There was an unpleasant smell, the odor of rancid sweat. Her turning on the light in the first room darkened the doorway into the second. From this darkness came a soft, pleading moan. She ignored it, tossing her car coat on the bed and sitting down. "Sorry I don't have any chairs." She touched a cushion on the floor with her toe. "It beats standing, but only just." She seemed to be trying to win me in a feckless, almost adolescent manner. When I sat down on the cushion I found myself at her feet. Something in me recoiled. I

did not wish to be in such a position before this girl. In fact, I would have been uncomfortable crouching at the feet of the Tsar.

And yet I did not get up. She touched my knee with her toe. "The cushion's only for show. You don't have to use it if you don't want to."

"What choice do I have?"

"A lot of them prefer the floor. It establishes a correct relationship from the beginning."

"Prefer the floor? I hope I don't seem stupid. What are you getting at?"

She tossed a rung of hair out of her eyes. "Prefer to kneel on the floor. But the cushion's fine. I don't mind."

There came again that clear, direct look, the hint of amusement around the mouth, the coldness deep in the eyes.

"Don't be scared," she said quickly. "Nothing's going to happen that you don't want to happen. Everything at your speed."

Protests filed through my mind. I controlled them, speaking smoothly. "I told you before, I'm not into an S and M trip."

"Fine. Neither am I. I thought we'd agreed on that."

"I don't understand."

She kicked me in the chest, not hard, but in such a way that I felt a thrill of pain right up to my heart. It is hard even now to understand how that gesture began the process of my death. But it did.

As I caught my breath she spoke, and her voice had a harsh edge to it. "You certainly do understand. Personality won't admit to itself what essence knows very well. You didn't run when I sat down at your table, did you? I started off by telling you exactly what I do and what I am. Unlike you, I didn't lie about myself. Now you're here and you're still having difficulty submitting." She tossed her head. "Look, my name is Janet O'Reilly. Janet Claire O'Reilly. I'm in the phone book, and if I move you can always call information. You need some time alone with this. When you're ready to see me again, call me."

She stood up. I was shocked and confused. I demurred, but she was resolute. A few moments later I found myself standing on her dark cellar stair, listening to her lock click behind me. I was about to turn and go when I heard what at first I thought was another woman in the apartment, speaking in a low voice.

"How dare you make a noise like that when I bring in an outsider. You could have frightened him away. Then he would have

lost his chance. You need to learn the importance of responsibility, I think. We're going to do a little heat."

Light flickered behind the curtains. In a moment there came a wail. It was so real and so raw with agony and despair that I recoiled. Yet the sound fascinated as well. I did not leave, not at once.

New York is a big, strange city and in its corners one can certainly find the odd and the dark. Who knew what I had encountered here. No matter how attractive this person was, how inoffensive and even innocent she appeared, she must be terribly dangerous. The cries went on and on, rising it seemed forever in intensity. Sometimes the light flickered and sometimes it glowed deep red, and at length there came an acrid odor from the apartment, like the smell of hot wax.

When the cries stopped I left, striding off down the street, and found that I was shaking so badly that I could barely control myself when I stopped at a crossing. My stomach turned. Unexpectedly, I vomited into the street.

When at last I arrived home the sky was gray with impending dawn. I moved through our warm, quiet living room, was greeted in the hall by Seymour, our most active cat. He rubbed up against me with a friendly meow. I knelt down and picked him up.

Never have I been so grateful for the touch of the familiar. He oozed and stretched in my hands. Cats seem to have been created for touching. I went into my bedroom, kicked off my shoes and stripped. I was going to get straight into that lovely warm bed with Sally when I noticed perfume around me. Some of Janet O'Reilly's scent was clinging to my hair.

When I showered the steam seemed to intensify the scent. I washed my hair and used body shampoo as well. Free at last of the slightest residue of the night, I slipped between the sheets. My wife moaned and drew close. She was warm and I was grateful.

I was too sleepy to react to the fact that I could still smell that perfume. It must have gotten into my clothes.

I was swept at once into a dreamscape. Many of my dreams take place in a shadowy land that is partly the neighborhood where I grew up and partly a dark country of my own imagining. Journeys there are accompanied by a strange and delicious poignance. It is always night in those dreams, and always autumn.

On this night I found myself in a terrible situation. I was to be executed. My tormentors were not unkind--in fact they were sweet and friendly.

She was there. She came to me and supported me while one of the others loaded a high powered rifle. I was slack with terror. The bullets clattered into the magazine, and one of them clicked into the breach. She held me under my arms, keeping me erect so that the bullet would pierce my chest in the right place. As the ritual moved slowly along, she spoke kind words to me. "Is there anything we can do to help you?"

"Somebody could hug me."

"Oh, ok, I can do that."

As we remained there together something quite unexpected happened to me. My will, the core of my identification as a separate self, ebbed slowly away. The ebbing of will was like black water revealing a drowned cathedral.

To be free of oneself is to escape a great blindness. A palace universe spread around me, and I found that my tormentor was an angel who in her abiding kindness was willing to suffer with me the very real torture of tearing down the stones of my personality in order to allow my true, essential self to join the hidden dance for which it was made and intended. My whole will was in her hands: I was so free of myself that I even lost the wish to beg her for my life. She

spoke softly and insistently. I realized quite clearly that she was giving the executioners their orders.

Then the door of the bedroom flew open and I was assaulted by a cheerful parade of kids. It was Sunday morning and here came Alex Jr. and Patty and Ginger along with assorted cats and dogs and stuffed toys. Sally moaned and laughed as our bed filled with children and animals.

My happiness surrounded me. The love, the joy, the warmth banished all my brooding dreams. The dreary landscape receded. I remembered only that wonderful face, and the delicious moment when I realized just how much a relief it is to surrender oneself to a higher will.

Although the perfume lingered for days, a poignant harbinger of my own death, I found that my ordinary life quickly reasserted itself. I did not forget about Janet exactly, but I discovered that my mind was turning away from the book I have called Pain and toward stronger, richer subjects.

Three months later I was well into the book that became The Night Man and no longer troubling my mind with the odd and repellent world of sadomasochism.

We were here in this house when I had the dream that made me remember her. It wasn't really a dream, but a sort of possession, an agony of the soul that came upon me in late afternoon. The family was out riding. I had taken a swim and spent ten minutes in the hot tub listening to the birds sing out by Sally's suet feeder. I'd gone into the house in my long cowled robe and opened a beer. The next thing I knew I was in a tiny, droning airplane with Janet. At first I didn't recognize her. Then I saw that she was flying the plane, watching me out of the corner of one eye. She spoke in a language I could not quite understand.

I saw the whole world as a single, coherent entity, an enormous living organism. It is hard to express the impact of this sense of wholeness. There was tremendous detail: a man gently breathing his last, his hand in his child's hand; babies wriggling; the inner stones of the earth radiant with teaching heat; a young woman singing in a sunny back yard. The vision went on and on, until I saw the world as a tiny dot of light, a bright ark forever voyaging.

Then I saw the missile silos and the atomic warheads, and the images of the powerful, the President leaning against a doorway with a glass of orange juice in his hand, three Russians speaking intently in

a room, and in one of their faces the same expression that she had, the same fatal kindness.

Over it all there was a soft and gentle song. They love us. They do. We are their grass, their trees, their rooting piglets. They have grown immense on us, sapping us, whipping us with war and famine and pestilence, designing brain and body for more and more breeding, until the world is choked with billions upon billions of shining, brilliant human souls ready for the slaughter. Ready also, for growth.

The point of a sacrifice is that it satisfies the need of a higher being. This need is not for suffering, though, or death: it is for the enrichment of the soul. Janet was striving mightily that I would learn my own truth. Only then would I be of real value to her. The concept of sacrifice as appeasement is merely wishful thinking. The angels will never be appeased, not by anything except the expansion of true wisdom in our world.

While I swooned on my couch with beer foaming down my robe to the floor, she remained close to me, nursing me with the hands of death, speaking in her light voice, encouraging and explaining.

I awoke alone to the long evening sun, the whinny of horses and the voices of my returning family.

I was so exhausted that I could not raise myself from the couch. Later that week my doctor told me that it was not my first heart attack, and that I needed to revise my life. Exercise. A healthy diet. Less stress. Early heart attacks are dangerous because they are so often silent--a period of fatigue, a slight tightening of the chest.

Summer waned and autumn came. We returned to another city winter. The kids went back to school. Sally and I settled back into the satisfactory routine of our marriage.

Hardly a day passed, though, that I did not think of Janet O'Reilly. Her face, so grave and gentle--so very beautiful--had been fired on the center of my consciousness. Again and again my mind returned to the moments I had spent in her apartment, the cushion, the gentle, hurtful push, the subtle confirmation of my place.

I wished that I had done things differently. She had wanted me to submit to her in some way, I was still unsure about the details. If only I had humbled myself on the bare wood, had given myself to her will, might I not have somehow escaped?

What was she--an angel, a demon, some being from the world beyond the barnyard fence...or my anima, the feminine principle that Carl Jung believed resides at the center of every male.

Whatever she was, I was uneasy with the growing urgency of my hunger to submit myself to her.

My third heart attack was a stunning cataclysm of pain. I was in my room writing when the color seemed to drain from the leaves outside my window. I sat helplessly watching the world become dark and gray, then the pain came clubbing up from the center of my chest: Moloch's flaming jaws gaped where my heart had been.

Sally found me lying on my side on the floor and I was taken to the hospital in an ambulance. I could hardly breathe and even the oxygen didn't seem to help. Sally's silence, her tears, hurt me to my quick. Her hand never mine.

A week passed in the hospital bed. Then the machines told the doctor something I was glad to hear: it was time for me to go home.

Janet came to me one afternoon when Sally was out shopping and the kids were at school. She appeared in my bedroom. My eyes were closed. At first when I smelled her perfume I assumed that I was dreaming, she had come on such silent feet.

"Hello, Alex. Would you like to take a walk with me?"

"You! Where did you come from?"

She looked at me with kindly condescension. "Alex, I like your invincible adherence to the expected. I'm going to take you for a walk now. We're going to my apartment."

"My God, I can't possibly! Look at me, Janet, I can't get out of bed."

But I did get out of bed. When she got me up I simply could not resist. She took me into the bathroom, she shaved me and washed me up. "Now how do you feel?"

"Better."

"I thought so. It's a sunny day. You need some sun."

I dressed, and by the time I was wearing fresh clothes again I really did want a walk. Seeing her dreary brownstone in the light of afternoon, though, almost made me turn back. "No," she said, and drew me on.

I forced myself to continue. When we got to the house I forced myself to descend the stairs. Then I heard her voice behind me, melodious with laughter. "What are you doing?" She was standing on the stoop of the main entrance. The light fell on her. Despite my familiarity with her I was not prepared for the purity of this vision of beauty. Looking up, gaping, I almost tottered backward. She laughed

aloud. "You look like a surprised ostrich. Come on up, we're just in time for coffee." With shaking steps I ascended the stairs.

Inside, the upper floors of the brownstone were beautiful, a perfect Federal restoration. I've not much of an eye for furniture, but I do know good antiques when I see them. Contrasted to my memory of the basement, these palatial surroundings were all the more remarkable.

She walked ahead of me, casually swaying her hips in her jeans. We went into a sun room full of orchids, a truly magnificent and intimate space. It smelled of sweet, tropical flowers and rich coffee. "Mom and dad, I'd like you to meet a student of mine."

Her words flashed through my mind like a whip of lightning. I realized that it was true. I was indeed the student of this remarkable being. I was grateful for it, but I was also embarrassed. Before two of my peers in age, I felt mawkish. They seemed indifferent to my discomfiture. As if prepared for a formal portrait, they sat together on a loveseat. They were more than handsome, they were regal. The man was tall with a mane of blond hair and ash-gray eyes. His wife was a serene version of her daughter. It occurred to me that Janet was also a student. By working with innocents, she was learning patience.

Did they know what their daughter did in the basement? What a question--of course they did. This was their home.

I realized that there was hidden in their faces an expression of suppressed glee. They were triumphant: their Janet was a hunter home with a shattered stag. They had sifted the leaves of men and chosen me; I had been caught in a net of careful intention.

Janet glanced at me. "I take two sugars. A little Half & Half."

In a kind of red daze of panic and disbelief, I poured the coffee. Such was the extremity of my emotion that the world around me had receded into dreamy unreality. I began to wonder if I was not in some sort of dream state even yet. But I was here, there was no doubt about that. I sipped my coffee. Janet was watching me carefully, but also with that merry gleam in her eyes.

She seemed to follow my thoughts. "I'm so proud of you," she said. "It took courage to come back." My heart hammered. I could feel their eyes searching into me. I had never felt so naked, so revealed. Her small compliment flushed me to my toes with embarrassed pride, I couldn't help it. I felt my face grow hot. I could not look up from the black steaming cup. I was a praised dog.

"Thank you," I managed to mumble. My words seemed to have been spoken by another person, or rather a machine that I only controlled from a distance. Why I would react so strongly to this family was clear to me. Seeing them in their serene presence told me something I would have preferred to deny. I had to face how glorious they were, and so to see my own inadequacy.

Janet took my cup and put it on the saucer. Her hand entered mine, guided me to my feet and toward a door at the far side of the room. "It's going to be difficult for him," she said over her shoulder.

"I never listen," her mother said quickly.

"I don't think he'll be noisy." She laughed softly, in which sound I detected a small but deeply unsettling measure of contempt. "He's too proud." She drew me along. "I think he might try to leave." Her hand tightened. "Do you think that, Alex?" "No. I won't do that. I've made my decision."

Her hand was extremely powerful, and she was hurting me. "No matter what you think, you haven't made a decision. I made the decision."

We went together down a dark stairway into that other world. We were in the back room, the one I had not seen. It was as dreary a

little chamber as I have ever entered. Against one wall was a small steel closet. There was a bare metal bedframe under the low, barred window that looked out into the back garden.

The view from this window was the only nice thing about the room, and it was very nice indeed. Observed from these surroundings the sight of the garden with its careful borders, its climbing vines and floral shrubs, was heartbreakingly beautiful.

It hit me with the shocking force of unexpected insight that this room was not devoted to the decadent amusements of the people I had been studying for Pain but for another purpose. This was the place of death.

Her arm slipped around my waist. She did not come up to my shoulder, but still I leaned my weight against her. In a soft voice, speaking quickly, she explained the purpose of the steel closet. "It's called the Standing Room. You can't stand up, not quite, and you can't sit down. It is what I have chosen for you. There are many other ways, but they tend to be more intimate and less prolonged. You need conditions that will force you to face yourself. You have a lot still to see, and I know the effect that small places have on you."

When I was a child I'd been stuck in a telephone booth. The thing was awful and black and stifling and I hadn't been able to get out for what seemed like hours. All of my life I've had a nightmare about being buried alive, where I wake up and I am in a coffin and I feel horribly alone and I start to suffocate.

"Would you like to try it?"

I stepped back, my eyes searching for the stairs. I felt sick, about to retch, dizzy with terror. My heart was weighted with the deepest sorrow. I thought of my family, of our precious happiness. Again she took my hand. Firmly, she drew me toward the box. "It might be fatal," I babbled. "My condition--"

"It won't be fatal, not this time."

"I can't. I know you want me to and that makes me want to, but I just can't. You should have left me alone."

"You have it in you, I know you do."

"It's true then?"

"You understand the purpose of the sacrifice. You have always understood it. You were born for it, raised and educated for it. You have dropped your fruit in the sun. Now it is time for you to pay."

I wanted to protest, but truth in her words could not be denied.

"Undress, Alex. Go in the box."

Ashamed, I turned away from her. I forced my hands to stop shaking. 'It won't be fatal,' she had said. I did as I was bidden, removing the familiar blue sweater that Sally gave me for my birthday ten years ago, taking off my shirt and undershirt, my shoes and trousers, my socks, my shorts. Standing behind me, she took me by the arms and pushed me toward the miserable little closet.

What a stupid thing. Why was I doing this? Why was I here?

Before me danced visions of the demons of war, pestilence and upheaval. In their eyes there gleamed the same flicker of genius that so drew me to this young woman. "Your death will not stop the harvest," she murmured. "That's just your imagination. You aren't that important. None of you is."

Her words caught my attention. I blinked, started to speak. Instantly she pushed me in and shut the door. The clang resounded in my ears, sparked in my brain. She'd given no thought to my position. I was contorted, my head thrown back, my face pressing against the ceiling of the thing. One arm was behind my back, the other twisted between my left hip and the back wall. "Please, I'm all twisted!"

Silence.

"Please!"

She laughed. It was a merry noise. Then there was silence again. I tried to turn myself, could not. What had been a discomfort soon became the utmost torment. All the while I could hear her outside. She made more coffee for herself in the other room. She played the radio for a time. I could hear pages turning occasionally. She was reading.

Then she went out. She went out! I jerked, gasped, in a claustrophobic panic. My heart thuttered like a thing of paper. Finally exhausted, I wept.

She was gone for hours and hours and hours. There was no way to lessen the torment. My neck felt like a column of red hot wire. My left arm was tingling, both of my legs were numb, my feet were throbbing with agonizing pins and needles and I was nauseated.

I would fall down a well of unconsciousness, only to be dragged back by my agony. I would call out into the thick, suffocating silence. But she was never there.

I lost track of time. I was frantic to get back to Sally and the kids. They would miss me by now, they would be terrified. Nobody would find me back here in this basement, nobody, not ever.

Then I heard her. My heart leaped up, tears of relief stung my eyes. My mouth was so dry that I could barely make a sound. I moaned, it was all I could do. A short silence followed, then voices. She had somebody with her? Her parents? No. A man. A friend, she had brought some demented friend to enjoy my suffering with her.

But the voice was so gentle, so firm and decent. So full of awe and love. It could have been my own voice a year ago.

My blood went cold. This was a repeat of that situation, an exact repeat, only now I was the victim moaning in the dark. I remembered the flickering light, the red glow that had followed my last departure from this place.

Pray God she hadn't heard my own careless moan. I tried to be as quiet as humanly possible. I barely breathed. I prayed. Long and hard, I prayed.

The door opened and closed, the guest left. Immediately there were footsteps, rat tat tat right up to the wall of my prison. "How dare you moan like that when I'm working with somebody! That was a potential student, you stupid fool! What if you scared him away, think how much he will lose. Think of it!"

I saw the other man, saw inside his mind as Janet must see inside minds. There was a fuzzy, confused jumble of ideas and thoughts, a great gabble of voices. There was no wisdom at all, nothing more than the empty fear of an animal. To be truly human there must be clarity. We must know the body and understand its relationship to the soul. If he did not return here, he would lose his precious chance to understand. I might have denied it to him.

"I'm going to have to explain obedience to you. I will not do it in words, but in the body's language." There was a crackle, then a pop followed by a sustained hiss. "You'll have to take some heat, Alex." Her voice was not mean, not even hard. It was simply, absolutely final.

I have never known such suffering as I knew over the period of time she applied the torch to the outside of the steel box. She did not burn me but rather baked me slowly. I sweated, tickled, itched. The box became a humid hell. I screamed, helplessly, totally given over to my pain. I cannot fully describe in words what I felt in those hours. But I can say that my spirit separated from my body, yet remained very intimately a part of it. The lesson I learned was of incalculable value. I understood the limits of my body, and its tragedy. It has done

my real suffering in life. It must do the real dying. As the cup is not the wine, Alex is not me. Understanding this, I began to know myself a little.

To learn this lesson was the reason she had brought me here and submitted me to such suffering. The whole torment of a lifetime had been concentrated into a few hours. I was now at the threshold: she had taught me what is essentially needed to be well prepared for death.

The heat stopped.

"Can you speak?" I tried, but nothing came out. I wanted to speak, though, and she knew it. "Try harder, Alex."

Finally my voice cracked to life. "Thank you."

"Well said. You've understood. Say it again."

"Thank you, thank you."

When that door opened it was as if I had been delivered to the threshold of heaven. A rush of holy air caressed me and strong hands pried me loose from my confinement. With powerful ease she carried me to the bedframe. There she affixed cuffs to my wrists and ankles and stretched me mercilessly, unknotting muscles without regard for the sensation she caused. I thought she was tearing me to pieces.

At last, though, I lay spreadeagled on the bed, every muscle in place, neither tingling nor numb. I ached, of course, but I was otherwise undamaged. "Let me bring some strength back into your limbs." She touched me, and I went from a state of aching exhaustion to one of increasing strength. I have never been massaged by such delicate or knowledgeable fingers. I have never felt such light, clear energy flowing through me. Inside of half an hour I was a new man.

She smiled when I sprang up before her. "You'll see me soon." I was still arrogant enough to assume that it was a question.

"Of course," I replied as I dressed. Inwardly I jeered: what a lie. I'd never come near this poor, mad creature again. In my weakened condition I was lucky to have survived.

"The next time we'll go the whole way."

"Certainly. I'm looking forward to it."

"Yes, you are. At last, you really are."

I have never been so glad to get home in my life. I wept in Sally's lap. I told her as much of the story as I dared, saying that I'd been abducted by some of the lunatics I'd met when I was researching for Pain. She was furious, she wanted to call the police.

The thought made my blood stop in my veins. I could do nothing that might bring harm to my precious Janet. Too much depended on her. The same man who had left her house an hour before with the firm intention never to return already saw her again as a shining angel to be loved and protected. Frantically I explained to Sally that a call to the police might embarrass me.

A few days later I was alone in my office working. Janet's hands had rejuvenated me to an amazing degree. I had entered the final stages of recovery from my heart attack with a speed that delighted my doctor.

Sally was off watching a school play. I was not really surprised when Janet walked through my office door, having gotten past the doorman and into the locked apartment with no difficulty at all.

The shock gave way almost at once to a strange, awful feeling, more a sensation. My body seemed to want to drop to its knees. It was silly. I was embarrassed at myself. "Why resist," she said lightly.

I did it, and was rewarded with the certain understanding that what stood before my crouching form was no young woman. My feeling of worshipfulness changed to awe. I could not move, let alone

look up. I thought I might not be able to bear what I would see. Then a hand came down and raised my head.

"Surprise."

She was the same as ever. She took my chair, began bustling through my personal papers. I saw her take my tax returns, my accountant's reports, my net worth statement, copies of leases and contracts, everything of any financial significance.

"You've earned the knowledge that your end is coming," she said. "Don't ignore your obligation to prepare." A week later she returned and reviewed my will with me. Her knowledge was expert, and we made revisions together. When we were finished she laid her hand on mine. I could feel her watching me. "Do I have to come with you now?"

"Do you want to?"

My impulse was to say no, to scream it, to howl it out. But I had grown cunning at this game. "I might as well get it over with."

"You'll wait a little longer. The next time we meet I will call, and you will come."

It was a small triumph, or so it seemed at the time. I had no idea that a year would pass. Day after day I have waited for Janet. I have

lived in a grim ecstasy of suspense. I hear her footstep behind me, see her pushing through a crowd. Once she was standing silently in the door of my office. But she turned and left without a word.

My family has grown closer, more full of love, happier. My work has prospered as never before. My reviews are excellent, there's talk of awards. Most painful of all, Sally and I have reached a new level of closeness both sexually and spiritually. Sensing what awaits it, my whole being is clinging to life. I am a tower of sexual urgency. An old marriage has become new again, full of delight and play and fun. Night after night I go to her side of the bed, and she meets me with open arms. She sings all the time. We have gone together into undreamed universes of love.

The wind shakes the cabin. Somewhere out there I know that Janet waits in the cold. One day, she will come for me.

When she does, she will tear my heart from my chest like the priests once did to their anointed victims on the altars of the Aztecs. This time there will be no reprieve: she has graduated me from her school. I will watch her squeeze out the pumping life, and my soul will be caught in her hungry jaws.

Once this frightened me, but no more. I thought that I was alone, among a select few victims of the sacrifice. But this is not true. Every human being is sacrificed; all death has value.

Janet is nothing more to me now than the progress of the clock. The horror of the sacrifice is an illusion, for the end beyond--the soul absorbed into the breast of these mighty beings--is rapture as well as oblivion.

I do not hate Janet. Because she has given me a glimpse of what beyond the walls of life is true, I can only love her. I wait as she comes scything down the rows of autumn. Although her call will mark the last stroke of my life, it will also say that my suffering is not particular, and in that there is a kindness. She comes not only for me, but also for those yet unborn, for the old upon their final beds, and the millions from the harvest of war. She comes for me, but also for you, as in the end for us all.